

# CONSERVATION CROP ROTATION

(Acre)  
Code 328

Natural Resources Conservation Service  
Conservation Practice Standard

## I. Definition

Growing crops in a recurring sequence on the same field.

## II. Purposes

This practice may be applied as part of a conservation management system to support one or more of the following:

- Reduce sheet and rill erosion.
- Reduce soil erosion from wind.
- Maintain or improve soil organic matter content.
- Manage the balance of plant nutrients.
- Manage plant pests (weeds, insects, and diseases).
- Provide food for domestic livestock.
- Provide food and cover for wildlife.

## III. Conditions Where Practice Applies

This practice applies to all land where crops are grown, except pastureland, hayland, or other land uses where crops are grown occasionally only to facilitate renovation or re-establishment of perennial vegetation.

## IV. Federal, State, and Local Laws

Users of this standard should be aware of potentially applicable federal, state and local laws, rules, regulations, or permit requirements governing conservation crop rotation. This standard does not contain the text of federal, state, or local laws.

## IV. Criteria

The following criteria apply to all purposes.

### A. General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes

Crops shall be grown in a planned, recurring sequence as outlined in Plans and Specifications.

Crops shall be adapted to the climatic region, the soil resource, and the goals of the producer. Adapted crops and varieties listed in appropriate university publications or other approved sources, shall be selected.

A conservation crop rotation may include crops planted for cover or nutrient enhancement.

Crops shall be selected that produce sufficient quantities of biomass at the appropriate time to reduce erosion by water or wind to within acceptable soil loss levels. In those instances where crops selected do not produce sufficient biomass to meet this criteria, a cover crop (see NRCS Field Office Technical Guide [FOTG], Section IV, Standard 340, Cover Crop) or other appropriate practices shall be used. The amount of biomass needed shall be determined using current approved erosion prediction technology found in the NRCS FOTG. Soil loss estimates shall account for the effects of other practices in the conservation management system.

### B. Additional Criteria to Maintain Or Improve Soil Organic Matter Content

Crops shall be selected that produce the amount of plant biomass needed to maintain or improve soil organic matter content, as determined using the current approved Soil Conditioning Index Procedure or determined by approved research.

If partial removal of residue by means such as baling or grazing occurs, enough residue shall be maintained to achieve the desired soil organic matter content goal.

Cover and green manure crops planted specifically for soil improvement may be grazed, as long as grazing is managed to retain adequate biomass.

**C. Additional Criteria to Manage the Balance of Plant Nutrients**

Crop selection and sequence shall be determined using an approved nutrient balance procedure.

When crop rotations are designed to add nitrogen to the system, nitrogen-fixing crops shall be grown immediately prior to or interplanted with nitrogen-depleting crops.

To reduce excess nutrients, crops or cover crops having rooting depths and nutrient requirements that utilize the excess nutrients shall be grown.

**D. Additional Criteria to Manage Plant Pests (Weeds, Insects, Diseases)**

Crops shall be alternated to break the pest cycle and/or allow for the use of a variety of control methods. Affected crops and alternate host crops shall be removed from the rotation for the period of time needed to break the life cycle of the targeted pest.

Resistant varieties, listed in appropriate university publications or other approved sources, shall be selected where there is a history of a pest problem.

**E. Additional Criteria to Provide Food for Domestic Livestock**

Crops shall be selected to balance the feed supply with livestock numbers. The needed amount of selected crops shall be determined using an approved forage-livestock balance procedure.

**F. Additional Criteria to Provide Food and Cover for Wildlife**

Crop selection to provide either food or cover for the targeted wildlife species will be grown, managed, or left unharvested as per the needs of the targeted wildlife as determined by an approved habitat evaluation procedure.

**V. Considerations**

- A. When used in combination with NRCS FOTG Standards Cross Wind Stripcropping, 589 or Stripcropping Contour, 585, the crop sequence should be consistent with the stripcropping design.

- B. When used in combination with Residue Management practices, selection of high residue producing crops and varieties, use of cover crops and adjustment of plant population and row spacing can enhance production of the kind, amount, and distribution of residue needed.
- C. Where maintaining or improving soil organic matter content is an objective, the effects of this practice can be enhanced by managing crop residues, tillage practices, utilizing animal wastes, or applying mulches to supplement the biomass produced by crops in the rotation.
- D. Where excess plant nutrients or soil contaminants are a concern, utilizing deep rooted crops or cover crops in the rotation can help recover or remove the nutrient or contaminant from the soil profile.
- E. Crop damage by wind erosion can be reduced with this practice by selecting crops that are tolerant to abrasion from wind blown soil or tolerant to high wind velocity. If crops sensitive to wind erosion damage are grown, the potential for plant damage can be reduced by crop residue management, field windbreaks, herbaceous wind barriers, intercropping, or other methods of wind erosion control.
- F. Where pesticides are used, consider application methods and the crop rotation to avoid negative impacts on the following crop due to residual herbicides in the soil or adverse affects on aquatic wildlife or habitat through runoff.
- G. Soil compaction can be reduced by adjusting crop rotations to include deep rooted crops that are able to extend to and penetrate the compacted soil layers, as well as avoiding crops that require field operations when the soils are wet.
- H. Leaving several rows unharvested around the edges of the field will provide protection and/or food for overwintering wildlife.
- I. Crop plantings may be developed to benefit particular communities, species or life stages of wildlife. Food plots or crops for wildlife could be provided as part of a habitat restoration project as an initial food and

cover source for wildlife until food and cover producing vegetation becomes established.

- J. Crop residues may be a valuable food source for wintering wildlife where winter browse is sparse.
- K. Careful consideration should be given to pesticide use if applied to crops raised for wildlife.

## VI. Plans and Specifications

Specifications for establishment and operation of this practice shall be prepared for each field or treatment unit according to the Criteria, Considerations, and Operation and Maintenance described in this standard. Specifications should include the sequence of crops to be grown, length of time each crop will be grown, and total length of rotation.

Specifications shall be recorded using approved specification sheets, job sheets, narrative statements in the conservation plan, or other acceptable documentation.

## VII. Operation and Maintenance

Rotations shall provide for acceptable substitute crops in case of crop failure or shift in planting intentions for weather related or economic reasons. Acceptable substitutes are crops having similar properties that meet the criteria for all the resource concerns identified for the field or treatment unit.

## VIII. References

USDA, NRCS Wisconsin Field Office Technical Guide, Section IV, Conservation Practice Standards and Specifications.

Forage Variety Update for Wisconsin, A1525, UWEX, website:  
[www1.uwex.edu/ces/pubs/pdf/A1525.PDF](http://www1.uwex.edu/ces/pubs/pdf/A1525.PDF).

Small grain Varieties for Grain and Forage in Wisconsin, A3397, UWEX, website:  
[www1.uwex.edu/ces/pubs/pdf/A3397.PDF](http://www1.uwex.edu/ces/pubs/pdf/A3397.PDF).

Selecting Corn Hybrids, A3265, UWEX, website:  
[www1.uwex.edu/ces/pubs/pdf/A3265.PDF](http://www1.uwex.edu/ces/pubs/pdf/A3265.PDF).

Pest Management in Wisconsin Field Crops, A3646, UWEX, website:  
[www1.uwex.edu/ces/pubs/pdf/A3646.PDF](http://www1.uwex.edu/ces/pubs/pdf/A3646.PDF).

Avoiding Herbicide Resistance in Weeds, A3615, UWEX, website:  
[www1.uwex.edu/ces/pubs/pdf/A3615.PDF](http://www1.uwex.edu/ces/pubs/pdf/A3615.PDF).